

King of Methamphetamine Valley

Steven Richard Smith

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King of Methamphetamine Valley
by
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Chapter One

On a Tuesday afternoon I skirted the Mojave Desert by car, passing through a vast stretch of California where some say the bones of wild *Anglos* gone off the reservation remain buried in hidden canyons. As I neared the southern tip of the Sierra Nevadas and the foothills of the Tehachapi Pass, I cleared a series of abandoned canyons strewn with gray fire rings. Scattered around those rings like planets around the sun lay empty ether vats, ammonia bins, and pipes crusted with crystalline stars. Just setting foot there conjured up images of the man on the moon, lead boots treading through layers of gray powder.

Winds roared through one basin in particular. Lucifer's Bivouac, they called it. The baking heat there causes one to shudder with cold. Picture then night falling and dark faces around a midnight cauldron. Boiling crank has an occult mood to it, a mystic ritual that amounts to a horrifying treatment of the otherwise pristine valley and her silent mountains. The human shells that cook methamphetamine burn there regularly, from the inside out, lost in a mad pursuit of feeding an internal virus called *cranking*.

On the other side of the pass my car coasted into Methamphetamine Valley, where I caught 99 North for Fresno. In town I made a quick withdrawal at the bank and returned to the office, only to find a case file sideways on my desk among piles of time-stamped documents.

"What's this, Neil?" I asked.

He broke his attention from a raid sketch. He always wore his trademark collar shirts starched with severe creases. "Looks like you got your first ATF investigation, rookie."

"You serious? My own case?"

He nodded then returned to the pencil diagram, droning a tune I recognized.

"Is that a Tom Petty song you keep humming?"

He rolled his lips in agreement. "Something Big."

“I knew it. I like that song. There’s a good story to it,” I said, stepping around my desk for the door. I looked through the file a bit on the way to find the boss. “Mr. Wilson, this my case?” I held out the folder to him.

Brad stood at his desk in a sport shirt and Dockers, his mustache clipped neatly. He was miler thin, moving through the office quickly with erratic gestures, arms hinged to metal hooks rather than brawny lawman shoulders. He cleared his throat and dropped the pen on the desk mat. “Right. That guy’s a felon about to become a three-time loser. If we can get him on another gun charge, it’s fifteen years mandatory for Stanley Gorman. I tell you, I can’t stand this guy. I arrested him years back on the same charges—guns and dope. Guns and dope. It’s his life. Lot of good it did.” Then he asked with a smirk, “Can you handle it?”

I sat down in a chair. “Absolutely. And I appreciate the opportunity.”

“Alright,” he said, “let me catch you up to speed. Gorman goes by ‘Stan.’ He’s a biker president from Bakersfield. We charged him five or six years ago on a felon-with-a-gun charge. He did time for it, like I said. The old case report’s in there. Intelligence says he’s back on the streets selling guns but he’s into meth now. The dirtbags call it ‘crystal,’ some say ‘ice.’ County narcs traced him to cooks in the desert on the other side of Tehachapi Pass.

“We got an informant in Kern County lockup right now who’ll confirm the guns.” He paused and smeared his mouth with his palm. “This informant’s kind of kooky, a real philosopher. Wears wire-rim glasses and goes around quoting Nietzsche to everybody. And skinny? The guy’s like six three and weighs a hundred and fifty pounds if he’s an ounce.

“But he did help us with a case before and got a reduced sentence out of it. Goes by Telephone Ricky. Problem is, he doesn’t know when to shut his mouth. He got his head beat in for dropping a dime on an outlaw biker just last year. In fact, that guy was part of the Red Hawks. That’s the motorcycle club your guy heads up. I’ll put it like this: Telephone Ricky’s not real popular, even with the biker crowd. He’s a pain in the ass to both sides. So, he might be living on borrowed time. Last month, jailers separated him from the rest of the population, if that tells you anything.”

“So, where do I come in?” I stretched out my legs in front of his desk in an effort to appear comfortable.

He popped open a desk calendar and curled his mustache between thumb and forefinger. “I’ll be down there later this week—it looks like, let me see—Wednesday morning. I’ve got a meeting with the prosecutor in Bakersfield on a separate case. It’s a machine gun manufacturer—whole different story.

Anyway, I'll make arrangements to speak with the Telephone late Wednesday. If he confirms Gorman's selling guns again—or even has them—we can do something. We'll open a new case on him, and you can start doing surveillances. Get a little experience.”

“What, go down there and sit on his house?”

“Yeah, but not in your G-car. You'll take the van that's in storage. The warehouse is over on Olive. Ask Stubbs for the garage door key and directions. Then leave just your car there. You're growing your hair out, I noticed. That's good. Gorman won't know your face anyway, so you should be able to walk by his house without him freaking out. So cultivate a dirt bag look.” An image of a worn t-shirt and grimy work pants, my hair askew, made me grin. “I'm serious about that, Whitehall. You'll understand when you see the area—talk about blighted. The neighborhood there isn't exactly Herndon Acres with half-million dollar homes. You might pass as an oil derrick hand. You know, someone just passing through the neighborhood. So look natural and get ideas for the raid. Plus, you'll get to practice the surveillance techniques you picked up in Georgia.

“Ask one of em in the back for the van key today. Get directions to the garage. Might as well start driving right off to get the feel of that thing. It's big. Put all your equipment in a duffel bag then stash that out of sight in the back of the van. Just suppose somebody needs to look in for whatever reason. Thing's got tinted windows, so it should be easy to watch Gorman without any neighbor getting wise.

“So, it's a conversion van?”

“Yeah, right. We seized it in a raid up in Placerville. You should be able to drive down to his place and back most days. You might have an overnight here or there, I don't know. Depends on how this thing sets up.

“Look, if he starts acting hinky, we'll pull you out, nothing to it. And have Stubbs get you one of our radios. Those things beam up to our transponder and we can pick you up here on our base radio. That's in case anything weird happens. You'll be fine, though. This is low key stuff.”

“I think I got it,” I say, opening a palm to count fingers. “Start driving the van, dress grungy when I go down there, but wait for your call.”

“That's about it. If we do this, you'll want to set up down the street from the guy's place, take your notebook and binoculars. The address is in there. Place is over in Billy Goat Acres off Ming. Find it on the Bakersfield city map. Get one if you don't have one.

“Last I heard he’s living there with his girlfriend. I want to say the street is Grape something—is it in there?” he asked.

I thumbed through a police report and found an agent’s narrative. “Yeah, you’re right. Right here: 1006 Grapevine Street.”

“Of course, I’m right. I’m the boss,” he snapped with a smirk. “Everybody around there has a Rottweiler or pit bull, so expect them to start up when you park the thing. It’s one thing I remember vividly about that neighborhood, it’s the damn dogs. When time comes for you to make a raid sketch, you can transfer the layout from the old floor plan in there. I can’t imagine too much has changed.”

He rubbed his hands and twisted his copper mustache again. “I’ll know if he’s still dealing before you take off Thursday. I’ll let you know. But in the meantime, I’ll need your written report of that background you did in Yosemite. Let Keith look over your travel vouchers for your time in Havasu, too.

“First things first, though. Make sure you got the van key. Leave yourself time to get over there today. Fill the thing up with gas, drive it a while, check the tires, all that. That van hasn’t been used for a good spell. Worst thing you can do to a motor is let it sit.

“Anyways, that’s all. I’ll call you late Wednesday, probably at home. You’ll leave Thursday morning, so plan on it. No late night margarita specials with that wife of yours, if you know what I mean,” he said. I nodded and thought of Robin’s drinking, wishing I’d never mentioned it in my background report. I stood, prepared to shake hands, but he kept going. “Worst case scenario, if this whole thing is a no-go, well, at least we got a surveillance van that’s ready to roll when we need it.” And he pushed his bangs with a twitch and motioned me out of his office.

Chapter Two

From across the kitchen the telephone rang. I was stretched out on the dusty linoleum floor, knocking out my seventh set of pushups. I sat up breathing heavy and reached for the ringer. Brad was on the phone. His voice echoed over the line.

It was Gorman. Not only was he fortifying his place with firearms, word was he was selling meth in bricked quantities. Bakersfield narcs were going nuts for us to get down to Kern County. “We’re not drug agents,” Brad said, “so the county guys can wait. But I do want you down there in the morning. Start a surveillance log.”

I hung up and fell back to the grimy floor, working my pecs till they ached, fueled by the idea of working a case independently. That night I slept little more than three hours, tossing and turning, churning the blankets into a thin layer of night sweat. My eyes opened doing ceiling stares, flipping the pillow to its cool side and back amid heavy sighs. Too jittery, I got up, went to the living room, and read Bacon’s essays until my lids drooped over blurred typeset.

The sky as it lightened found me with a socked foot on the living room floor and a Penguin classic dangling from my fingertips, my open mouth dried from the whirring house fan. Naked to the waist, I stumbled barefoot to the porch. The beryl sky over the foothills shifted to a translucent orange. Across a nearby orchard, lemons dotted branches of slender damp leaves, and I sniffed and blew the morning dew from my head. Spanning the valley, morning fog sunk in one billowing cloud. I coughed loud enough to echo, groped my face to waking, and then walked back in.

Robin slept like a cadaver under the big comforter. She liked her stratified layers: soft sheet, quilt one, raggedy quilt two, then the teal comforter. The bed defied life. No rise and fall of visible breathing, no Jimmy kick, not even a groan from under the blankets. The gurgle of tequila I’d heard in the kitchen the night before, one drink after another without pause. That was Robin all right, power-drinking princess. No tipsy sock dance, no philosophical rant marked by slurred speech, not even a *do-whatever-you-want* roll in the hay. Robin drank with authority. No way was I shaking her hangover to life.

I changed into fresh socks and sweats, minor squeaks of the bed's edge and little grunts while reaching and tying shoes. I slipped outside to stretch. I began jogging and got to where I was running hard through vineyards, a metallic wheeze in synch with the rhythm of stride. The sun stared down over the Sierra Nevadas and bunched grapes hung suspended in shadows. I ran the vineyards, bending and twisting until my lungs burned and my throat dried. I spit the zinc taste from my mouth and spied two sleepy pickers stumbling through rows for the day's work, dirty buckets hanging from darkened hands.

Suddenly I stopped in a thin pillow of fog—a curious fox stood frozen before a grapevine, staring back at ten paces. I stood there in wonder. His ears perked up at sharp points and I held out my hands to him. The standoff ended in a draw after what I'd guess was a half-minute, and then he disappeared between wire-wrapped posts.

Crashing into the silent house, I panted as though I had scaled a mountain. I showered and dressed drifter style: torn jeans, raggedy concert shirt, a bandana tied to my head. I poured milk, grabbed a plum and a refrigerated chicken breast before shoving through the door for Bakersfield.

The van started loud and clamored with a *dribble-huh-huh, dribble-huh-huh*, enough to rouse sleeping neighbors. The walky-talky and revolver I jammed into the duffel in the back and raced off for the southbound ramp of Bloody 99, nicknamed for its horrific car and cycle crashes. Soon lost in the redundant miles of the valley and the motor's steady hum, I whistled through cattle and poultry country, acidic vapors of chicken shit and cow manure rising from the warming ground.

California's a state of myriad smells. Redwoods in the mountains, thick salty air of coastal towns, even the high desert reeks of potpourri, sage, and creosote shrubs. The San Joaquin Valley, however, is unnaturally pungent. Pesticides seep into the fields, livestock raunchy and putrid on the ranches, and always oil fields smoking like bad reefer. There was no escaping the smells, the van's air conditioning clattering so tin-pan loud I shut it off for fear of a complete breakdown.

As I neared Bakersfield, I rolled down the window to a squawk. Oil derricks humped fields outside Wasco and distant hats of refineries glowed and aspirated diesel. My legs shot with nerves as I left the freeway and swung into the city, winding through neighborhoods of tract housing, aluminum-sided cottages that went on for miles. I braked hard where I found Gorman's street, completely lined by incongruent chain-link fences.

In the center of the block was his shanty house, fronted with barbed wire and a blue one-ton truck in the drive. I stole a look through the front window: empty. Rolling to a stop down Grapevine Street,

the van motor cut off and pinged to a cool. The streets were people-hard, the pavement a tarry-gray limestone.

If a neighbor demanded to know what I was doing, I'd say meeting my cousin whose girlfriend lived here in the neighborhood. But no one stirred from the houses. It seemed there were ghosts hanging behind gossamer curtains. A dog barked several times, like Brad said, and that was it, just some dry mixed barking that finally stopped.

I crawled into the back and stretched my legs. Behind the smoked glass windows, I whistled lightly and poured myself a cup of black coffee. I set up the log book with crooked lines and rectangular boxes for Gorman's activity. I checked my watch. 10:24 am. Time for my first dubious note: "10:24 am. No activity."

I sat there in the quiet and considered my van's campy mural on the driver-side panel. Stubbs had told me the original owner was an artist who smoked pot every day and had painted the silvery lake and meadow before a range of snowcapped peaks. It had been seized in a raid and given to ATF. The first night I parked it in the garage at home the mural caught Robin's eye. Standing there barefooted in a skintight pair of Daisy Duke shorts and a halter top that left her breasts partially exposed, she nursed a margarita and hiccupped, "It is so pretty, Gary. It's so pretty."

Here on the empty street, I preferred something blue-collar, a work truck maybe, **Smith Plumbing** stamped in navy lettering on the side with discarded fast food bags and rusted tools strewn across a grimy dashboard.

Gorman stepped into the morning light.

I stopped unscrewing the Thermos lid. Binoculars in hand, I squinted and began separating mental details by relevance for the logbook. A cup of morning coffee struck me as ironic—caffeine for a meth user. That was hardly worth a case note. His green crew neck shirt? Again, no state's evidence there. The patchy beard? He was older. To sum it up, I had nothing to notate but a guy drinking a cup of coffee in his yard.

On second glance, the thin black rings of the field glasses did reveal details worth analyzing. I wrote that the suspect had lost weight compared to his former self pictured in the case file. The guard dog on the property might be a problem during the raid, especially for an agent or cop who might scale the fence and tumble into the yard at the wrong place. Gorman, I also scribbled on paper, climbed into his pickup truck at 11:03 am and disappeared into the valley's oily haze.

Easing out of the van moments later and closing the door with a flattened click, I angered that same barking dog. I headed for Stan's house with my head down, adopting what I thought was a believable, down-on-my luck saunter. Billy Goat Acres housed workers downwind from the fields of Oildale. The case file reported that a rare few were working for good wages, others were laid off, but most made ends meet from black market sales: chopped bike and car parts, stolen handguns, even dirt weed smuggled up from Mexico.

Civil engineers had bypassed this part of the county—no sidewalks, only rows of sun-bleached cottages wrapped securely by wire fences, each protected by firearms and mongrels. I measured my steps to record raid plan distances, tiptoeing past a strangled condom and torn foil against the curb, where a Blatz empty rested, its label faded and curled. Whoever might be watching me from inside the darkened living rooms were seeing nothing but a lone figure shuffling past with his head down. No meddlesome looks. No inquisitive stares. Just some dude in a faded Mellencamp shirt with shoulder length hair.

Two ratty teenaged boys appeared to my right, skulking through the cross street. We exchanged glares, their lips moving in a secret hum, and the paler of the two with strands in his eyes mumbled something about Mellencamp as they passed. I approached the chain-link surrounding the Gorman house, a neglected place of chipped gray paint. It would take a hell of a leap to get over that fence during the raid. The neighbor's adjoining fence was rolled with twisted concertina ribbon. At street's end, I looped around the block and back to the van. I threw in the key and figured I'd sit down at a Denny's and flesh out the logbook.

Behind the wheel, I sputtered across town and slipped under a large highway bridge. Just beyond it, I found the Village Inn, a family restaurant in a squat building with a mansard roof of teal-colored tin. The Village Inn was packed and I swept open the door to buttered egg smells, air thick with syrup that caused my stomach to roil with hunger.

"Awp," a meaty biker yelled at the coffee counter, "Leslie, you got one. You owe me a dollar, woman." Tufts of tawny hair curled at his collar, and he cracked a smile as I slipped into a counter seat on the far side and flung open the logbook to busy myself. Nearby, an elderly man with a terminal cough hunched over a bowl of oatmeal, slurping away, wiping his nose periodically on a flannel sleeve.

From the kitchen, a blonde with curvy hips sashayed toward the coffee maker—this had to be Leslie. Her hair was pulled taut off her clean face and braided down her back to a modest bow. Glancing at me, she cocked her head at the loud man tipping a coffee cup between his fingers.

“You know, just my luck,” she sighed, fishing a bill from her apron pocket. She slapped it to the counter and scooped ice into a cup with a gravelly noise, setting it against the dispenser while water tinkled in. “You want a top off?” she asked and reached for the coffee pot.

“Nah, ‘bout to leave out of here,” he said. He spun his chair and hoisted himself up. He pulled out a crumpled wad, hitched up his pants, and dropped several bills on the counter. “Go ahead, keep your dollar. I’ll have a reason to win it back next time. Money’s just money, anyway. I could give a rat’s ass.”

The blonde grinned. “Sometimes I think I got no luck at all, what, working here and waiting on you.”

The man grunted, waved a broad hand, and threw open the door for his motorcycle that sat there cocked in a lean. The oil-stained patch on his back featured a large bird, hard to make out the name from here. At the counter Leslie scooped the money with a pleasant hum in her chest, stuffing the bills into an apron pocket. She pattered over where I looked up and down the menu.

“Coffee, this morning?” she asked from the corner of my eye.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “I usually quit the coffee about this time of day.” I split my decision between a fat omelet and anything potato-based, figuring Leslie could call it.

Her face was pretty in a shocking way, bone-structure perfect with lips that pulled to a pouty close without trying. I clamped down the impulse to sputter something Hollywood: *what are you doing here?* I did wonder why some agent from LA’s magazines hadn’t caught up with her. Her complexion was flawless. I reached for my overturned cup and clanked it a bit.

“Well, you’ll have to live dangerously this morning,” she said, blowing a wisp off her face. She started to fill the cup. “You know, you almost lost me a dollar just by coming in here.” Her tone sounded jaded.

“That makes me feel welcome,” I said with a tilt of my eyebrows. The pot disappeared and she drew out an order pad.

“That man that just left comes in all the time. Sometimes we bet dollars if the next customer through the door will be a man or—”

“*Oh*—so that’s why he said that when I came in. I thought that—”

“You thought what?” Her voice had a natural husk, a suggestive throatiness.

I blew over the cup's surface as golden bitters heated my lips and tongue. *Good coffee, man*, I wanted to say, but the hourglass figure before me was far from mannish. She set her fingers on the counter, not a ring on any of them. I threw open my hands and said, "I don't know what I was thinking. I thought maybe that guy was your boyfriend or something."

"Munch? You kidding me? No. He's sweet and all, but—" Then she turned her head to the old man raising an empty cup. "I'll be right there," she called then whisked away, leaving behind a faint trace of amber perfume. She splashed full the old man's cup, whisked his bowl to the sink with a clatter, and tossed away a napkin. With a twist from her pad, she slipped his check to the counter and smiled graciously like she might a regular. While the old man dove into his trousers pocket, she caught me staring and smiled modestly.

There was nothing conceited in her eyes. Was this Bakersfield waitress one of the special women I'd heard about in that old Italian movie? The rare two-dimensional kind, beautiful inside and out? The face of Robin guilt-flashed in my conscience then vanished.

"I didn't mean to insult you," I said. I leaned in a bit and tried to study the badge pinned to her smock without ogling her breasts. "Liz, is it? I thought I heard that guy call you Leslie."

"He did. Leslie's my real name. He does that just to tease me," she said. "What are you gonna have this morning?" She turned the pad in her palm and held the pencil in abeyance.

I shook my head. "I don't know. What's good here? Never been."

"Our buttermilk pancakes are good. Made from scratch. That's what we're known for," she said brightly, glancing through the windows behind me.

"Hmm. Those always make me feel like I ate a truck tire or something." I place a curled hand at my belly.

She tipped her head back and laughed a great natural laugh. "You're funny," she said, tipping her pencil's eraser my way.

"It's true. What about this? 'The California.' What's a California?"

"Look outside," she said with a smile, making eye contact for the third time.

"Oh, funny girl, huh?" I dropped my eyes to the menu.

"It's a skillet dish, pretty big. Comes with hickory smoked bacon, potatoes and eggs and spinach—and, let's see—tomatoes, I think."

“Sounds good. By the way, I got your joke. That was pretty bad, you know,” I said.

“Well, what can I say?” She answered while looking around the place, nowhere in particular.

“Yeah, I’ll take the California. The whole state. That’s how hungry I am,” I said with a shrug.

“California,” she repeated, jotting ‘CF’ in tiny strokes on her pad. “With or without guacamole?”

I made a face. “Guacamole? On eggs?”

“Yeah, it comes with it. Most people say it’s pretty good.” She looked puzzled.

“Ah, okay. Let’s have that and a glass of milk to drink . . . and this coffee.”

“I’ll get that right out,” Liz said and clipped the order to the turnstile above a convex of heat lamps. She gave the carousel a rehearsed spin to someone in the kitchen visible only at the shoulders and neck.

I sipped the coffee and flipped to my surveillance notes, filling in details on the fences, the neighbor’s Rottweiler, and shuttered windows alongside Gorman’s place. I flipped it closed when I noticed her coming my way balancing a glass of milk on a tray. She set it down and rubbed damp fingertips to her apron, squinting at my logbook. Her head tipped slightly. “You a writer or something?”

“Not really, I was just going over some notes for work.” I grinned and dropped the pen to the counter.

She leaned in and asked, “So, what do you do?”

I made a face and sat back. I squinted at her and tapped the pen against the trim of the counter. “Not much.”

She fondled the napkin holder and her glossy lips curled. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

“It’s okay,” I said, clearing my throat. I rolled my fingers open. “I’m a derrick hand.” I choked at the phrase.

“You?” she asked with a smirk. The old man was leaving. She didn’t turn but he waved a hand from the door.

“Yeah. Why do you say it like that?” I scratched a fingernail at the menu, trying to draw her out.

“Oh, nothing. Most hands come in here all greasy, smelling like oil. You’re too clean,” she said.

I ran my fingers over the fresh-smelling face of John Mellencamp and pressed them against washed blue jeans. *You're too clean.* I pictured myself hanging from a monstrous oil rig. "That's cause I'm new. I'm supposed to get started up there this afternoon," I stuttered, hoping for a new customer to walk in.

She worked her hidden apron pen nervously *clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety* and lifted a brow. "Oh. So that's how come the notes."

"Yeah. I've got directions to the field out there," I stammered, pressing my palm down on the closed book.

"Where are you going to be working? You might wind up in Munch's Oildale crew."

I shifted in my chair and stared out the window as if an answer I needed might be found in the cottonwood trees around the parking lot. "No, I'm—they got me scheduled to start in Shafter. Up there in Shafter," I repeated in a geezer voice, pointing over my shoulder. "How long till that skillet's ready?" I gestured toward the kitchen, wishing she'd roll silverware into napkins or something.

She glanced at the heat lamps. "It'll be another minute," she said, crossing her arms and scrunching her nose. She wet her lips and asked, "So, do you know which rig you'll be working for? Because my uncle's worked Shafter for years. I'm pretty sure he's a tool pusher for JP Oil. He supervises roughnecks and roustabouts. If it's your first day, they'll probably start you with them, the roustabouts. But everybody starts at the bottom. Least that's what Munch says." Before she was finished speaking, I was shaking my head.

I crossed my arms, pits dampening. "All I know is they told me I'd be a derrick hand and how to get there." I swallowed and looked toward the floor behind her.

"You go straight up 43 till you get to—ope! Here's your California," she said and whirled away as I blinked and sighed quietly. She pinched two large plates from the pass-through and returned. "Oh. I forgot to tell you. It comes with a side of hotcakes, so I guess you'll be eatin' a tire after all."

"That's funny," I said. "I didn't say they taste like tires, I said they make me feel like I ate one." Berries on cakes, homemade pancakes versus restaurant cakes, brands of syrup she liked—I needed to talk about anything but oil drilling.

She set down a fluffy omelet that hung over its plate with flabby edges. "These hotcakes are just a side order, so you shouldn't wind up feeling too stuffed."

“How about a men’s room?” I asked, lifting empty hands to her. I needed a splash of water in my face.

“Oh, just right through the dining area there. Bear right and you’ll see the sign in the far corner.”

“Okeydokey,” I answered, rising to my feet.

“Hey—watch it,” she said with a frown. The front door opened just then and a mother and son seated themselves at her counter. I hesitated, then snatched the logbook and cut through the place, past covered tables and broad meaty faces planted in booths. A dull clatter of silverware and plates echoed throughout.

At the men’s room sink, I splashed my hands against the wide faucet spray and made faces of mock conversations. *Okeydokey*. What was that about? *Ah, Okie*, the Bakersfield settlement. I towel-patted off and went back to my seat, where I began to devour the California.

The windswept mother called up toast and tea and a bowl of oatmeal for her blonde boy. Liz spun from point to point, serving the pair in minutes. She drifted my way and leaned in perfume close. She smiled and hummed, “Is it good?”

I nodded at the voice that whispered the question. “Yes,” I said and resisted the fantasy of that husky voice buried in my ear in a hotel somewhere. I flipped three five’s down when it was time, and minutes later I was driving the highway north . . . thinking about that woman.